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Conversation with Rosi Braidotti

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Sarah Posman (nY) in conversation with [Rosi Braidotti](#) on contemporary feminism and *amor fati*, in March 2012.

Sarah Posman: *In Metamorphosis: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming you write that “time is on our side.” Do you still feel that way in the light of the present moments of crisis that we’re witnessing in society and academia – the lack of funding for Women’s Studies departments in the low countries is an urgent example. When there is revolt against these developments – the riots in cities across Europe, the academe-affiliated Occupy movements – it doesn’t seem to come in the Dionysian guise you promote.*



Rosi Braidotti: The phrase “time is on our side” is grounded both in an intellectual and institutional practice of feminism. For me feminist theory is transformative. This implies a debate with gender and gender mainstreaming, which is one of the great growth areas not only of the academe but of our society, and an area that will produce a great deal of employment for our students. Gender mainstreaming is egalitarian and terribly important. I support it completely, but it is not transformative, necessarily. I was watching TV last night, on the eve of international women’s day, and all the major international networks were doing features on the status of women. Al Jazeera had a wonderful set of interviews about women in the Arab world and women entrepreneurs in India. The global movement for the advancement of women is incredibly strong. You would have to be chronically depressed not to see how the movement of the

advancement for women is unstoppable, and it’s all the stronger outside the West. Think of the Arab Spring. There are so many models around where you see women on the vanguard. The last three Nobel Peace Prize winners are non-Western women. That’s a very powerful signal. So, yes, absolutely, time is more than ever on our side where it concerns the global advancement of women. However, for my generation, this situation is also problematic.

If we switch back to the West, which used to be the best, and to the debate equality - difference, or equality - diversity as we call it today, then I don’t see a lot of differential thinking or radical difference thought in the political movements that you’ve just mentioned, whether it’s the Occupy Movement or the Alter-Globalization movement. I don’t see any feminism there. I see the masculinism of what’s left of the Left doing what the left has always done and creating leadership positions for the boys, monopolizing the notion of ‘the political.’ Žižek, Badiou and all the great anti-feminists and critical theorists of today entirely dismiss the intellectual capital of feminism in

one stroke because it's only cultural and not political – according to their definition of the political, as political theology. So if we're not in the Schmittean thing of the friend and the enemy we don't have a politics? Feminism's pacifism rules out politics? Thank you brothers! This is a debate that goes back thirty-something years, to the clash between the Trotskyites and the feminists in '62-'63. I can show you a documentary, which shows the Trotskyites intervening on a feminist demonstration, in a park on the outskirts of Rome in the 1970s. You see the Trotskyites with big chains and iron bars, going for the revolution, which means confrontation and the kicking in of windows and heads. Later on they will go on shooting and killing people. The feminists, by contrast, sit in the park with their white hands saying "not in my name" and they get beaten up by the Trotskyites. The film is one of the great documents of Italian political history. I think we should project it, compulsorily, in all the Occupy this and Occupy that movements.

Of course there's not only the clash between the Italian feminists and the Trotskyites. You see the same thing in the terrorist movements of the twentieth century: think of Toni Negri and the red brigade. They were saying 'go out and shoot' but the women refused. There is also Margarethe von Trotta's film *Die bleierne Zeit*, about two engaged sisters, one becoming a feminist and the other a terrorist. The film shows how they fall out on the issue that the political requires negativity, negativity requires antagonism. Even now Hardt and Negri equivocate on this issue of violence. What constitutes the political? That is still one of the most crucial questions to ask. People forget that the women's movement in the 1970s was born as a critique of the Left, of the masculinism in the communist party, the Trotskyites. In the eighties, we shouldn't forget, we come to the point where right-wing politics actually absorbs women's rights and the Left rejects it. We're dealing with an extraordinary history here which needs to be mapped. The immense capacity of advanced capitalism to adapt, transform and move on is in sharp contrast with the Left, which continues on the same principles, unable to evolve. They cannot evolve because they have not absorbed the lessons of feminism, post-colonialism, and anti-racism. The format of critical theory today is that of white men talking to each other about dead white men. The Badiou-Žižek alliance I find catastrophic in terms of feminism and cultural politics. These thinkers are deliberately anti-feminist and at times even misogynist.

The feminists in the West are caught between the masculinism of the revisionist crypto-communist agenda of these movements and the gender-mainstreaming agenda, which is not transformative. That's a situation peculiar to our culture. It's not the case in the Arab world or in China, where you have a totally different story, a totally different political atmosphere. In our climate the younger generation, with the support and love of the older generation, needs to make a cartography of what exactly is going on. What is the sexual politics of these so-called radical movements? What I've seen from Occupy Utrecht and Occupy Amsterdam came down to the girls mending the socks and making the coffee. The leadership is solidly masculine and the politics are nostalgic. I'm utterly disappointed with all of that. But nevertheless I firmly believe that history is on our side. The movement is one step forward, three steps back. We need time. Nobody thought there would be a highway to progress. We need a Dionysian timeframe with loops and cycles and series and sequences and repetitions with difference to advance one millimetre. But just having the right women in the right places – that alone can change the world. I remain pathologically optimistic but I hope my optimism is grounded too. The nature of political transformation is cyclical, not linear. We need loops, not straight lines.

SP Which role can, or should, the humanities play today?

RB I've finished a book on the post-human [*The Posthuman*, Polity Press 2013] and it has a whole chapter about what is post-human about the humanities that I'm very proud of. It begins on a self-critical note. I'm part of the generation that went into the university to restructure it – the long march to the institution. We assumed that we would play a transformative role in terms of curricula. And I think we have. Central to both my work in gender and now for the Centre for the Humanities, is the pioneering of new ways of thinking. Nobody, however, would ever have thought that the humanities themselves would come under attack from the system that is advanced capitalism. We thought that we were so much part of the establishment that we considered ourselves untouchable. And although I've grown up reading Deleuze and Guattari's analyses of advanced capitalism, I never stop being amazed at how ruthless advanced capitalism is. It will consume anything, even the humanities, if it has to. I think that that is probably one of the great shocks, for me, of this particular phase, where under the effects of globalization on the one hand and enormous technological evolution on the other, the humanities are sinking.

So, how does a former student of Foucault's react to that? I grew up with the death of man, the end of humanism. As a feminist and a critical theorist you can claim a position of exteriority. A post-humanist can say "the humanist culture amounts to everything I don't care for, why should I lament its disappearance?" At the same time there is a sense of mourning at the passing away of that culture because many of the key feminist figures were major humanist thinkers: from Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir. These are women who believed in the universality of something called womankind. Yet I was raised on Cixous, Irigaray, Deleuze ... all the people who were critical of de Beauvoir. So there is a peculiar ambivalence and there are moments when I really mourn the passing of a culture which, although politically it wasn't mine, one somehow took for granted: the great humanists in their institutions, Leuven, Edinburgh, Utrecht, Bologna, blabbering on about humanity and mankind. And you could say "oh it's anthropocentric, it's Eurocentric," but that was our world. When that goes, a confused type of universalism takes over, on the back of globalization. The crisis is profound.

I think it's paradoxical that the best analytical tools that we have at our disposal to make sense of the crisis come from poststructuralism, which is the very philosophy rejected by the universities. They banned the very theoretical instruments which could assist them in the task of redefining themselves. But they're so busy fighting all of that, that they remain stuck in an ancient model of the humanities, particularly in Europe. The Americans have a very different position because they have accepted a lot of deconstruction and poststructuralism. And they are fighting back. The Center for the Humanities at Harvard is directed by Homi Bhabha. They have really incorporated postcolonial theory. Utrecht didn't have a postcolonial program until two years ago. The big American colleges have incorporated radical philosophy and they are critical of humanism in consequence. European universities have expelled the very theoretical movements which now could help them to reinvent themselves. We have set up a European Network for Centers of the Humanities where we discuss the new forms of critical disciplinarity that are coming up, after the decline of the classical humanities, after the decline of postmodernism and after globalization. We focus on what that means for tiny little Europe, with our nationalistic tendencies, our increasing poverty, and our rising xenophobia. We are caught between methodological nationalism and increasing dependence upon the rest of the world, economically and financially. We are really between a rock and a hard place and it will take an enormous amount of creativity and courage to reinvent ourselves.

Having said that, my money is on the humanities. I think we can do all of that because a new generation is in place, and because the humanities are written into everything, including science and technology. You cannot do science and technology without culture. I can quote Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, Stephen Jay Gould ... the list is enormous. Culture is embedded in scientific practice. The idea that the two cultures are separate is a completely old-fashioned idea. Today information technologies are dependent on art history, on analyses of visualization. The imbrications of the two cultures are extreme. We need to redefine that relationship in much more positive terms than how the policy makers are presenting it. Again, that will take a bit of work and courage. The methodological nationalism is the real problem for the humanities. We can negotiate the relationship to science, but the relationship to otherness in Europe is a big issue, and a political issue. Whether we want to become global universities, which *Theory, Culture and Society* calls 'multiversities' and be open to the world or whether we want to become bastions of Flemish identity, bastions of Dutch identity, of Englishness, of Frenchness ... that is a political choice. And there I'm a little bit more pessimistic because the forces of society are so xenophobic at the moment that they are pushing the universities to become provincial little centers as opposed to being open and bringing in the world.

Utrecht has chosen to be a global university, we have some seven hundred Chinese students. That's a small step in the right direction, but if you look at Northern American universities you see that they have people from other parts of the world already in positions of directorship. The Vice Chancellor of my old university in Canberra is of Chinese origins. We are really behind in that respect. There is something about Europe and self-identity. The challenges surrounding biometrics and quantification can be met. The process will require some effort but it's not beyond our means. The big problem for Europe is multi-lingualism. Of course we should cherish our many different languages but the fact that we're in a multi-lingual academic climate here really works against a unified system of quantified assessment. I think we need to move beyond the English language frame and develop a system that will enable us to have quantifiable data collection within a polylingual system. We have the European Union for that. The changing academic world demands a different pedagogic approach. We have to tell our students "you publish in the following journals or

you just won't have a job." It's a professionalization exercise. I was trained so badly by my professors at the Sorbonne. It took me years to understand what ought to be the case. If the universities are funded by tax payers' money we had better send a clear message to our students: professionalize or get another job. For me this professionalization exercise also implies that we start teaching the humanities instead of the disciplines. That meta-disciplinary move will take some time since the attachment to the disciplines is enormous but the centers for the humanities that are popping up right now are interesting exercises. Leiden is opening one, the Amsterdam University is opening one. Those centers pose the question "what are the humanities?" For somebody like me, who has abandoned her discipline a long time ago, it's not a big issue, but for people who have been raised in their discipline it's a very painful exercise. It's almost like leaving home.

SP *Time and temporality have often been taken up in feminist debate. Two fairly recent examples that come to mind are Rita Felski's Doing Time (2000) and Elisabeth Grosz' Time Travels (2005). I was wondering how you feel about Felski's project in Doing Time, where she states that "for women who are only now beginning to assume a role in the public sphere it makes little time to think of our time as one of loss, melancholia and belatedness" (16) – should feminists embrace a modernist make it new?*

RB The time problem is a well-established debate in feminist studies. I'm thinking of one of Kristeva's texts from the early 1980s that I like and keep quoting, called "Women's Time" in which she talks about the double structure of time. But we should really go back to the founding texts – Joan Kelly would be an example – on the double vision of feminist theory, which is critique and creativity. Critique ties you to the present (diagnosis, resistance, cartographies) but creativity is the future. Creativity projects you into where we're going next. Critique and creativity imply different temporal frameworks. I think feminism differs from classical Marxism, and consequently all variations of communism, in not believing in a Hegelian philosophy of time. The Hegelian scheme implies a pretty linear process with very clear switches, with clear breaks and a dialectics that gives you a sense of where history is going. My Marxist friends even today know exactly where history is going. They can name the point where the multitudes will coalesce into a world of insurrections. I'm sorry, but I switched to Spinoza way back in the eighties, with Deleuze. The multitudes of Hardt and Negri are really not the infinite measure of singularities in Deleuze. The whole point of a Spinozism is that nobody knows where history is going. There is no such thing as 'a history going'. There are multiple fluxes and practices at both the micro and the macro level, going all over the place. Capitalism is schizophrenia, remember. It's not the Highway of Hegelian history moving on through the Winter Palace to the Heavens of the World Revolution. I don't believe in that. That's what so fundamentally wrong, not so much with the Occupy Movements and the multiple insurrections that are happening, but with any attempt to create an over-arching theory of political revolution on the back of an absolute multiplicity, of very complex forms of interaction, of political action. The drama of so much of critical theory is the hangover from Hegelian Marxism. Even Eugene Holland, my good Deleuzian friend, in his book on nomad citizenship still posits a slow world revolution in the making. I hope that there are complex and multi-layered forms of resistance and re-evaluations of alterity happening globally. Why should all of that make one revolution? That smacks of a nostalgic time trip that takes us back to a situation that I don't recognize in the present.

Then there is the point about psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is terribly important, particularly the Lacanian intervention, because it splits the time sequence in potentially multiple levels. Freud, coming out of the nineteenth century, had a pretty linear vision: the past is traumatic, the trauma repeats itself in the present, you get to work on the memories, and arrive at a more or less sustainable future. Lacan already makes the picture more complex by introducing continuities, but he had his own agenda and by the end of his life he turns into a rather conservative political thinker – that's how I see it. He still appeals to the authority of the past but by the past he doesn't mean human nature, which would be the Freudian thing, he means human history. In Lacan's scheme the symbolic system is here to stay. It's by now consolidated in an institutional history, sedimented in our psychic structures. The symbolic system amounts to an immutable, authoritative past. This is where Deleuze and Guattari come in. *Anti-Oedipus* is a critique of the temporality of psychoanalysis. They say you can't continue with the authority of the past, the unconscious is ahead of us, it's a propelling force. Desire is positive, not negative.

In this discussion, Derrida comes in as a footnote to Lacan. He takes a line off Lacan and develops his own, rather aporetic methodology. In terms of feminist theory, Judith Butler emerges from that paradigm and the point of Rita Felski, that I totally agree with, is a comment on that particular negativity – negative in the sense of a chronically depressed continuation of Lacanian temporality.

The Derridean aporetic necessarily leads you to melancholia as the only form of political action. They're caught in a loop, there's no outside of the sign for Derrideans – so they mourn the impossibility of something and at the same time bear witness to the desire that something might be possible. I have written extensively against this tradition because that is really the opposite of affirmative politics. In the Spinozist mode there's no room for this way of thinking because you're engaging with the present in the name of some hope, some project that doesn't emanate from your own, from an interiority that is necessarily structured by narcissism and paranoia but that instead generates in relations, in connections, in collectivities, in practices, that is always future-bound and complex and differentiated and necessarily local. You have to be *somewhere* to be able to engage in political praxis. Angela McRobbie makes an interesting point when she compares the Deleuzian affirmative politics to the Butlerian melancholia – and she prefers the melancholia, but so do many people, because it's maybe psychologically more understandable. Depression is considered noble, happiness vulgar. Spinoza already comments on this, on taking the risk of actually being affirmative, on overturning the strange hierarchy of affect and emotion. So I'm with Felski on the necessity of an affirmative feminist politics, which is not a Candide-like naiveté but almost an act of faith in the conditions of possibility. This amounts to a leap of generosity towards the present. And feminism has done that all along.

SP *In Nomadic Theory you touch on the amor fati approach of neo-vitalist feminist thought. Could you elaborate? What is a nomadic spirituality?*

RB I think that the post-organicist vitalism is very much the philosophy, the science of today. Our science deals with life. It does so in genomics, when we're looking at climate change and problems of extinction, when we're facing ecological and environmental issues, and when we're dealing with all of the immaterial sections of the economy – the fact that our economy actually sells moods, from drugs and alcohol to the service industry. The whole mood enhancement industry is advanced capitalism. Vitalism is coming up as the feature of the day, the politics of life as Nick Rose calls it, or "life as surplus"s in Melinda Cooper's words. This life is profoundly non-linguistic, non-metaphoric and really material. It has to do with material codes, with genetic codes, with moods, with depression, with psychopharmaceutics. How to relate to that when you come from feminist studies is a challenge. We come from social constructivism, at best. This means that there is a moment before you engage with the real – whether it's identity, nature, the private –, a moment before you enter the social. We find it hard to imagine today how wrong Simone de Beauvoir was in saying one is not born a woman, one becomes one. One is born female. All the scientific work on chromosomes teaches us that one has chunks of flesh that are pretty much coded. But do we listen to modern science? It is difficult for some feminists to relate to something that is not social constructivism. And here again the Deleuzian front is so interesting. Deleuzian feminists like Laura Parisi and Claire Colebrook stress matter. Matter is alive, it is sexed, it is reproductive, in humans, in animals, in plants, in the cosmos.

I think we need to work with the concept 'matter-realism,' a new materialism. But this also implies a change in political culture. Next to the problem of social constructivism there's the problem of poststructuralism. The dominant tradition in the big American colleges is linguistic – Lacan and Derrida. Deleuze and Foucault, the rat-pack Lefties, have a different academic genealogy. The American Foucault is a problem by itself, but the European Foucault and Deleuze have generated a self-generated wave of studies. We're now doing in Utrecht a general regional coalition of Deleuze studies that will circulate from university to university, just to allow new work on Deleuze to be presented. Similar things are happening in China. I've been invited to a major Deleuze conference in China. Nobody's controlling this but the surge of academic work on Deleuze shows that this philosophy captures something essential about the spirit of the age. And what it gets right is the paradox of vitalism and materialism, which means the end of social constructivism and the end of the linguistic turn. The big question of course is where is feminism in this? My loving quarrel with Butler is that she pushes the linguistic turn to extremes. And the only place where this gets us to is mourning and melancholia, the aporetic. It's critique for the sake of critique. All you can do is consume an area and move on the next one: you consume woman, the female. You just burn the terrain without offering creative alternatives. My advice to the younger generation is to work with women scientists.

The best way to enter the discussion is via the work of Shulamith Firestone, one of the great technonerd of feminism, and to jump to Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller. They don't come to matter through text but through matter. We need to become bio-literate. If we fail to do so we cannot deal with what's happening and then critical feminism will end up irrelevant. Gender

mainstreaming continues booming but the transformative feminist theory has big methodological challenges to face. And here being a Deleuzean is a great asset. It helps you enter this discussion. And if we do, we might see the return of the female. If you read Frans de Waals work on bonobo communities run by the females, driven by sex – that's a community I certainly can relate to. But we need to engage with primatology. I want to run with the she-wolves. We have not really taken into account yet the profound reproductive powers. We turn them into problems, and there certainly are problems, but there are also incredible forces that run through our bodies and that we need to reconnect to. Whether you have children or not is beside the point. We are the generators of the future. This is very strong in non-Western feminism and it's one of the keys in a nomadic spirituality. It's already in Spinoza – “think about what a body can do” – but it got thrown out by the second-wave-feminists. Being a mother was a problem, having a family was a problem ... all of that will return with a vengeance.